'Spooks'—the Ghost Kind and the C.I.A. Kind—

Are Busy in South Vietnam

This dispatch comes from Malcolm W. Browne, chief correspondent for The Associated Press in South Vietnam for the last two years, who is now on vacation in Tokyo.

TOKYO, Oct. 7—When John Richardson began his assignment as chief of the United States Intelligence Agency unit in South Vietnam, he had to use Buddhist monks to exercise the ghosts in his villa.

The specter of a different kind of Buddhist ghost has been a major factor in Mr. Richardson's recall to Washington.

In fact, all the American spooks (intelligence men) in South Vietnam have come under close and critical scrutiny—not only from the Saigon Government but from State Department officials as well. A new man with a new mission may soon occupy the small office on the second floor of the embassy where Mr. Richardson worked.

Mr. Richardson's recall is believed to be partly a result of a disagreement over tactics with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who came to Saigon in August.

President Ngo Dinh Diem and his family have charged that the C.I.A. actually plotted a coup to overthrow his Government last month. The United States Embassy called the charge nonsense.

Behind endless charges and countercharges, how much of a role have American intelligence agencies had in developments in Vietnam?

Under the former Ambassador, Frederick E. Nolting Jr., Mr. Richardson and his men had a key role. As special assistant to the Ambassador, he was a close friend of most of the Saigon Government's top officials, including those in the secret police.

Mr. Richardson and the 200 or so agents under his command were in on the grand strategy in the battle against the Communist guerrillas. Saigon politics were sidelined.

The United States Special Forces in South Vietnam were actually a military arm of the C.I.A. Later, the Special Forces were transferred to the Military Assistance Command headed by Gen. Paul D. Harkins, and became a regular unit.

The Special Forces had a vital part in securing Vietnam's jungle-covered highlands. Six-man teams in some areas administered entire villages of thousands of tribesmen. The Special Forces suffered heavy casualties.

At another level, Mr. Richardson worked closely with Ngo Dinh Nhu, the President's brother and chief adviser. Ngo Dinh Nhu and Mr. Richardson planned American aid for the strategic hamlet program.

In a recent interview, Ngo Dinh Nhu pointedly recalled that his forces that raided Buddhist pagodas Aug. 21 had been created by the United States.

Mr. Richardson is bald, wears glasses with heavy horn rims and dresses smartly and conservatively. He looks and acts every inch the diplomat. He is a specialist in counter-insurgency, having fought Communist guerrillas for his agency in Greece and the Philippines. Both campaigns were ultimately successful.

Mr. Richardson and his wife, when they got to Saigon last year, were assigned to a villa with a reputation of being haunted. The site had been used successively by the French, the Japanese, the Vietnamese Communist interim Government and again by the French. It had been a place for torturing political prisoners.

Servants refused to work in the villa at first, saying the ghosts of victims would cause trouble. Mr. Richardson solved the problem by hiring a team of Buddhist monks who were experts in exorcism.

Things were going well for Mr. Richardson until Aug. 21, when the smouldering Buddhist crisis exploded into violence and martial law. The United States denounced Saigon's actions, and a favorite question became: "What will the C.I.A. do about it?"

The finger of suspicion was immediately pointed at Mr. Richardson and all American intelligence groups, even though there was no evidence the C.I.A. planned to do anything at all.

The C.I.A. is not the only American agency involved in intelligence in Vietnam. Some of the other groups are the 704th Military Intelligence Detachment, the embassy's security office, and the aid mission's Rural Affairs Section, headed by Rufus Phillips, a former C.I.A. agent with experience in the Phillippines.

Theoretically, all these agencies work together. In practice, all generally assign their own men to key jobs. Sometimes agents have been infuriated by a lack of exchange of information.

Some agents in Saigon were in almost open revolt against United States policies at the height of the Buddhist crisis.

"How can we be so stupid? How can we go on supporting something like this?" one said during a police attack on Buddhist women and children demonstrators.

Mr. Richardson said he opposed any action that would weaken the Saigon Government's war against Communists, but called the Buddhist problem "a grave and dangerous situation."

But in the early hours of Aug. 21, after the bloody raids of the night, he told this correspondent he believed his one-time close associate, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was probably behind the whole thing.

Government suspicion of all Americans deepened immediately.

The director of the United States Information Agency, John Mecklin, was publicly accused of having acted for the C.I.A. in instigating foreign correspondents against the Government. Mr. Mecklin has generally advocated support of Ngo Dinh Diem Government.

Correspondents were told privately they themselves were under suspicion of bing C.I.A. men and that some might be assassinated.

Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu, linked to the C.I.A. extending suspicion to most of the 15,000 Americans in South Vietnam, [illegible] Tapping of private telephone lines reached the point that persons were receiving sinister warnings seconds after ending conversations with The Associated Press.

Some Americans began to wonder about each other. Some were convinced that the C.I.A. actually did try to engineer a coup.

Mr. Richardson in the past was a critic of Vietnamese opposition elements, and until the Buddhist crisis, saw little likelihood of a coup.